

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen & Eric Venbrux
(eds)

New Perspectives on Myth

Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference
of the International Association for
Comparative Mythology,
Ravenstein (the Netherlands),
19-21 August, 2008



*PIP-TraCS – Papers in Intercultural Philosophy and
Transcontinental Comparative Studies – No. 5*

New Perspectives on Myth

to Michael Witzel, the driving force behind it all



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Papers in Intercultural Philosophy and Transcontinental Comparative Studies, and *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, are published by Shikanda, Haarlem, the Netherlands

ISBN: 978-90-78382-072

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Preface

by Wim van Binsbergen & Eric Venbrux

The Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) was held at the former convent of Soeterbeeck near the small medieval town of Ravenstein in the Netherlands on 19-21 August 2008. This volume, entitled *New Perspectives on Myth*, contains the proceedings of the conference.

In total the work has 19 chapters. The volume consists of five parts: an introduction offering a report of the conference, a section on *The Mythology of Death and Dying*, another on *Mythological Continuities between Africa and Other Continents*, a section on *Theoretical and Methodological Advances*, and a final one on *Work-in-Progress*. Indexes of proper names and of authors have been added to assist readers in consulting the proceedings, to highlight the links between chapters, and to provide something of an inventory of current comparative mythology as a field of studies.

We would like to thank the following institutions for their financial contributions, making the conference possible: the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, USA; the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW); the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands; the Sormani Fund, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands; the International Office, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands; *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*; the Research School NISCO, Faculty of Social Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands; and the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM), Cambridge MA, USA.

We are also indebted to Kirsten Seifikaar, who as copy-editor polished up the English of many contributions and brought the bibliographical material up to a common standard; and to the editorial team of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, for taking care of the book's layout, production, cover, and index.

Last but not least, our thanks are due to the International Association for Comparative Mythology, and to the participants in the Second Annual Conference of that organisation, for creating the intellectual conditions towards the present book, and entrusting its realisation to us.

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Chapter 5. Death as defilement in Zoroastrianism

by Victoria Kryukova¹

Abstract: In spite of that the Indian and Iranian traditions are close, as regards to death, even the common motives and subjects (such as the story of Yama / Yima, the chthonic dogs) appear in a rather different way in Zoroastrianism. So, Iranian Yima, as we can see starting with the Avestan Videvdat, unlike Indian Yama, is neither the first mortal, nor the King of the dead. In fact, Yima is not concerned with death, but on contrary is, like Noah, a savior of righteous people from it.

As to the Zoroastrian dogs, unlike the Indian dogs of Yama, Iranian ones don't look for people predetermined to die, but accompany Daena, the personal belief who leads immortal souls to the other world. Thus, at least in mythology (and not in ritual practice), sacred dogs are removed from the dying and dead to avoid the contaminating contact with death.

The distance separating these characters from death in Zoroastrianism could be explained from the idea of death as the greatest defilement, which is 'infectious' and can infect with death all good creations. Therefore it's undesirable for heroes, deities and holy creations to be in any contact with death. To some extent, this idea exists in many religions, but it became an 'idée fixe' in Zoroastrianism, overriding other mythological motives and ritual practices.

The Avestan Videvdat is devoted mainly to the driving away a demoness of death and decay Druxsh-ya-Nasu (lit. 'Lie which is Corpse'), which comes in the form of a fly, flying from the North, the direction of hell. Although several names of demons specializing in different aspects of death are known in the Avesta, this one is the principal in the Videvdat. She attacks a dead body and penetrates it through its 9 holes. This pollution infects with death those around and for the purification some rites are needed, connected with isolation and repeated ablutions.

On the one hand, the isolation of the 'infected' with death who has to be purified, as it is depicted in Videvdat, typologically and in ritual practice is very close to the testing of a candidate during initiation (and the place of isolation is like a grave, a cave, a womb and so on). In the same manner the sinner is isolated, who carried a corpse alone (he becomes a 'container' of Druxsh-ya-Nasu). They let him to reach the old age out of the community and then kill him ritually. The custom of isolation of a dying person (who is dying always because he is infected with death) has continued among Tajiks till our days in the foothills of Pamirs. They leave the dying alone in a special building, sometimes for several days without any care, waiting for his death. At the same time the idea of the infecting 'blackness' of death is widespread among the Iranian peoples.

On the other hand, the Zoroastrian system of ritual ablutions, which are fulfilled in the direction from N to S during 9 nights and days in 9 holes (probably, the most ancient variant of this ritual was discovered by Sarianidi in 2007 in Gonur (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex); this could, maybe, along with the NE (?) image of the fly-contamination help to understand some differences in the Iranian and Indian myth and ritual) with the purpose of driving away pollution and death, repeats, as it was noted by some scholars, the very rhythm of the liturgy. The 9 holes (as well as 9 nights and days) associate with 9 rivers of the Iranian world picture, 9 holes of the human body and so on. This shows a correlation of microcosm and macrocosm, which both are purified from death and pollution.

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1. Affinity of Old Iranian and Old Indian traditions

When the similarity and affinity of Old Iranian and Old Indian traditions are described, a set of common or closely related notions, mythological themes, images, names of deities, rites are usually mentioned, which are primarily known from literary sources, namely from the corpus of Vedic and Avestan texts. A characteristic example of such comparison is the parallelism between the heroes of the Indian and Iranian myths of divine twins, Yama, the son of Vivasvat and Yima, the son of Viuuar̥haṇt. The parallelism is all the more so unambiguous, because even the names, both personal and patronymic, of these legendary kings and culture heroes are cognate. However, notwithstanding the undoubted commonness of the primary meaning of these names with some other images of Indo-European myths, Iranian tradition alienates ‘radiant Yima’ (*yimō xšaētō*) from the realm of Death, at least in a version survived in the Avestan ‘Codex of ritual purity’, in the Vīdēvdād (‘the law discarding the *daeuiās*’ (Skjærvø 2007: 106, Benveniste 1970), which became one of the foundations of the following Zoroastrian religious literature.

1.1. Heaven’s abode

Thus R̥g-Veda calls Yama ‘the gatherer of people’ (RV X. 14.1) and the first mortal, who showed the path of death to others (RV X. 14.2), whose abode is higher heaven (RV X. 14.8), *avarodhanaṃ divaḥ* (RV IX. 113.8) – according to R. Dandekar ‘closed place of sky’ (Dandekar 2002: 86), Bloomfield’s ‘heaven’s firm abode’ (Bloomfield 1972: 144). Yima’s abode, the concentric fortification *Vara-* built by him, is an entirely closed building, equipped with sole lighting coming through the ‘door-window, selfilluminating from inside’ (V 2.30).² The Sraoša’s (Avestan deity of obedience) ‘palace of thousand columns’ located on the highest peak of Haraitī was probably a pattern of such a description. It is said that this palace is ‘selfilluminating from inside, covered by stars from outside’ (Y 57.21: *huuāraoxšnəm aṇtarə.naēmāš stəhrpaēsəm ništara.naēmāš*).

It is notable that there is an allusion of this construction in one of the latest Avestan texts – V 14.14, which also indirectly connects it to abode of the righteous in heaven mentioned in the Avestan Yašts. V 14.14 tells about the building (for atonement for the greatest sin – the killing of an otter, a sacred animal which gives fertility) an unusual ‘house with cattle-shed’ and ‘marvellously made beds’, whose origin goes back to the description of the heaven’s abode of Aši and Arəduuī Sūra Anāhita (Kryukova 2007: 350-351). Usage of terms, words and word-combinations from other Avestan texts is typical for Vīdēvdād, which was partly composed in the Avestan language which was already dead.

Thus we can outline the connection between the very earthly Yima’s construction and heavenly gods’ abode and compare them with the heaven abode of Yama,

² On the translation ‘door-window’ see: Steblin-Kamensky 1998: 80 with note 3.

despite the fact that in the Avestan text itself it is written that the construction is not the place of posthumous blessed to dwell in, but it is a cover keeping them alive from ‘cold wind and the hot one, pain and death’ (V 2.5, Y 9,5). In the latter I see an exaggerated urge to deny physical death as suffering and destruction of the body.

1.2. Heavy rain

Middle Persian texts treat the image of Yima in the same sense, not connecting king Yima to death. Menog i xrad XXVII 27-31 narrates about the construction of a refuge Yimkard (‘made by Yima’) by Yima, where the chosen good creatures escape from Markūšan heavy shower (av. *mahrkūša-*, ‘destroyer’),³ which probably appeared in the Pehlevi text by consonance with Hebrew *malkōš* ‘heavy rain’ (West 1871: 134). If we accept West’s proposal, we’ll have a combination of Iranian and NE myth in which ‘frost and cold’ turn into heavy rain, and the situation becomes more and more similar to the flood story. At the same time, could we suppose that the Avestan variant of myth is also a consequence of the invasion of NE tradition, and its Middle Persian reading just turns us to sources of these images again?

Ancient Indian variants of the flood myth are connected with Manu, brother of Yama, just as latter is son of Vivasvat (Śatapatha brāhmaṇa I 8,1), with Viṣṇu (Mahābhārata III 186-187, 194) and Kṛiṣṇā.

1.3. Three steps

Returning to the Avestan story about Yima, we need to note the strongest connection between Yima and Viṣṇu: famous three steps of Viṣṇu, with which he measures earth, and which embrace three worlds, corresponding to Yima’s earth enlargement in three movements with two wonderful tools. É. Pirart found that the Avestan words used in the description of Yima’s Vara, which also consists of three parts, demonstrate a sequence of ‘floors’ (the higher, the middle, the lower) (Pirart 2007: 165). The same is the case in V 14.14 and we can suppose that this is another connection with the three steps of Viṣṇu. There is also an essentially Avestan character, the already mentioned owner of a heavenly palace, a god Sraoša. Frādaṭ.gaēθəm – ‘enlarging earthly world’ serves as his epithet. Perhaps, following Sraoša (Y 57.29), Vīdēvdād’s Yima became the owner of two tools and also two kingdoms or rules (Sraoša defends people in two worlds – material and mental, Y 57.25). The fact that Sraoša is named the first of Ahura Mazdā’s creatures, who respected him and other deities as a priest, with barəsman in hands, also connects Sraoša’s image with Yima’s Vīdēvdād story – this is the role of priest proposed to Yima by Ahura Mazdā, which Yima rejected.

It is interesting that Yima and Viṣṇu connection appears or passes on to the story of the construction of Vara, because we see here a mention of feet, so important

³ Bartholomae: ‘Zerstörer, Verderber’ (Bartholomae 1904: 1147).

in Viṣṇu's image. (In fact hands are mentioned too, because, evidently, myth's narrator would feel bewilderment otherwise):

V 2.31 Thus Yima said iwithin himself:
'How shall I mangage to make that Vara
which Ahura Mazdā has commanded me to make?'
And Ahura Mazdā said to Yima:
'O beautiful Yima, son of Viuuuā~haṇt!
Trample (vīspara) this earth with they *heels*,
and knead (vīxaḍa) it with thy hands,
as the potter does when kneading (vīšāuuaiieīnte)
the raw clay.'

It is evident that this plain construction technique was mentioned here solely because the matter had mythological basis. All verbs used for denoting the operations with the earth, – *vīspara*, *vīxaḍa* and *vīšāuuaiieīnte* have the prefix *vī-* which has the meaning of division; in addition *vīšāuuaiiaṭ* is used in V 2.11 just for describing the enlarging of the earth: 'Thus Yima moved apart (*vīšāuuaiiaṭ*) this earth so that it became one third more than before'. The process of building the Vara of three floors (three heavens) is a repetition of the enlarging of the earth in three movements.

So we can suppose that it is Yima who represents the deity in Iranian tradition (or appears as its pale shadow), which was named Viṣṇu in India. Furthermore, in Yima's story told in the second chapter of the Avestan Vīdēvdād, we even can see a detailed two part story telling of RV passage dedicated to Viṣṇu, for the sake of defence (rescue from the anger of gods / *Asurs* ?), happiness and prosperity of men, measuring the world in three steps:

RV VI.49 He who for man's behoof in his affliction thrice measured out the earthly regions,
Viṣṇu

When one so great as thou affordeth shelter, may we with wealth and with ourselves be happy.

(Tr. by Ralph T.H. Griffith (The Hymns 1973))

1.4. Son of the sun

There is also another line, showing, on the one hand, a connection, and on the other hand, – discrepancy between Iranian and Indian images and characters. The role of the first mortal is occupied in Iranian mythology not by Yima, but by Gaiia Marētān (av. 'mortal life', pehl. Gayōmard), 'from whom', according to Yašt 13.87 Ahura Mazdā produced family of Aryan lands. There are some details in Middle Persian literature about creation of Gaiia Marētān as the first man by Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazdā) and about his death, which is determined in advance by Ohrmazd and will happen by

the hands of the antagonist of Ohrmazd, Ahriman. This first death was very basis for increase and multiplication of life and, according to logic of Zoroastrian theologians, was quite defensible. This idea of death's excuse as of an impulse of life's increase is not expressed in the Avestan text (Yašt 13.87) at all and the very death is not mentioned there.

Epithets of Gayōmard in the Bundahišn are 'light' (rōšn) and 'white' (*spēd*), likewise epithets of Yima in the Avesta are 'beautiful' (*srīra-*) and 'radiant' (*xšaēta-*). Perhaps this could show a connection of both characters with sun-cults without speaking about the fact that the father of Yima is Viuuar̥hañt ('shining'). We can find out a little about him from the Zoroastrian texts, but he is a sun-god in Indian tradition. Indian Vivasvat personifying light in heaven and on earth is also a father of people. At the same time he is the father of Yama; and a parallel to Vivasvat image, Mārtaṇḍa, ('from the dead egg') refers us to the name of the first Iranian man, to Gaiia Marētān, 'mortal life'. So, Yima is connected with sun because he is its son. But one of the features of a sun-god is also Avestan Sraoša, who begins his daily way in the East, where India is located, and finishes it in the West (Y 57.29). Apparently this is a reason why Vara of Yima and palace of Sraoša are 'selfilluminating from inside', – Sraoša is sun himself and Yima partly inherits features of Sraoša, due to the genealogical connection with sun.

1.5. Sun-god

In its turn, returning to what is common in the images of Iranian Sraoša and Yima and Indian Viṣṇu, it is necessary to mention, that the latter also has bright features of a sun-god, which has been stressed many times. In addition to this, embracing three worlds with his three steps, with the last his step, Viṣṇu climbs to the highest sphere of heaven, where the abode of Agnī-sun is (RV I.72.2-4), where the gods live in bliss (RV III.29.7), where the abode of righteous is (RV I.154.5-6). This, without doubt, returns us to the heavenly abode of Vedic Yama and to the connection between Vara of Yima and palaces of Sraoša and gods of Yašts.

1.6. Death

Summarising what has been said above I like to look closely at some aspects of it. First, in view of all diffusion of mythological images and subjects, telling about the first mortal and therefore about the appearance of death, the Iranian tradition in contrast to the Indian one, gives to Yima the features of Sraoša and Viṣṇu and diverts death away from him (and also, unlike the Middle Persian texts, from Gaiia Marētān). Second, in subjects, connected with these two Avestan characters, Yima and Gaiia Marētān, there are no excuses for death (again unlike the Middle Persian texts).

2. Dogs

Roughly the same thing is applicable to the motif of the death-noose: whereas in the Vedas the noose figures as an attribute of Váruṇa, as well as of the king of the dead Yama (both of them being positive images), – the same tool in the Avesta belongs to one of the demons of death, *Astō.vīdōtu*, depicted, as well as all the other demonic beings, very unfavourably, as belonging to the realm of Darkness. An interesting functional shift occurs as regards the couple of the chthonic dogs. According to the Ṛg-Veda, they belong to Yama and look for those who are destined to die. The dogs are closely connected with death in the Zoroastrian tradition as well. However, this relationship is represented here in a different, if not the opposite way. The dogs, which are referred to in the Avestan *Vīdēvdād* (they are not mentioned anywhere else in the Avesta) as the second good creatures after the human beings, accompany the deity of Faith and the inner faith of a person (understood as one of the constituents of soul, a sort of inner double) already after one's death. This means that the encounter of the mythic dogs with a human does not take place when he or she is desecrated by dying and death, but when his / her soul has already been separated from the body. In contrast with the Vedic dogs, the Avestan ones do not attract the death, but, on the contrary, charm it away from a corpse with their sight, a capacity which accounts for the role the dogs play in the Zoroastrian funeral ceremony. The force of sanctity ascribed to the dogs by the Zoroastrians is so great, that they are entitled to substitute for a second person in the funeral rite, a single-handed fulfilment of which is believed to be a gravest sin. Obviously, all these details testify to the same connexion of the dogs with Death, which is well known all over the Indo-European world and even wider, but the Avestan texts represent this relationship in a very special perspective.

3. Good and evil

It is well known that the specific attitude to the death, dying, ageing, and corporal defect, is very characteristic of Zoroastrianism. It is beyond all doubt, that this attitude, subjected to the thoroughgoing (at least, in the priests' mind) division of the whole creation into the good and evil, could not leave the treatment of the mythic themes unaffected. According to this scheme, the life of the creatures of Ahura Mazda and the Holy Spirit belongs to the first side, and their death, accordingly, to the second. Besides, in addition to the natural development of the mythic themes under the influence of the idea of the main line dividing the Universe, direct revision by the priests cannot be excluded, which should have reached the full extent of its power during the period of the codification of the Avesta. It must be taken into account that the main internal tension of Zoroastrianism, which differentiates the 'Zoroastrian orthodoxy', ascribing primordial superiority to the Good Energies, from the 'Zervanite heresy', proceeding from the ontological equality of right and wrong, could also give rise to different atti-

tudes towards death. Whereas an orthodox saw in death the will of Ahura Mazdā, a Zervanite should have ascribed it to the realm of pure evil. A testimony to the fact that this problem was a matter of controversy among the priests, can be found, for instance, in the Avestan Vīdēvdād:

Vd 5.8. O Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! Does water kill? Ahura Mazda answered: 'Water kills no man: Asto.vīdotu binds him, and, thus bound, Vaiiu carries him off; and the flood takes him up, the flood takes him down, the flood throws him ashore; then birds feed upon him. When he goes away, it is by the will of Fate he goes.

Vd 5.9. ...Fire kills no man: Asto.vīdotu binds him, and, thus bound, Vaiiu carries him off; and the fire burns up flesh and vital force (uštana-).

It is evident here, how the priests solve the problem of a death caused by 'pure' sacred elements, water and fire. It is noteworthy, that in contrast with the subsequent Zoroastrian books written in Middle Persian, the compilers of the Vīdēvdād do not yet refer to the will of Ahura Mazdā as to the principal cause of human death. In the Avestan text we have *baxta-*, 'fate, destiny', which, as we have seen, operates over human's life and brings him to death, that is, immediately to the demons of death (the question arises, whether *baxta-* is to be interpreted in this context as a deity or a constituent of human being.)

3.1. Assaults on bodies

Avestan *vaiiu-* means 'air, wind' and '(Good) deity of air and space'; in the Avesta the relation of the two Vaiiu to good and evil is not specified. Asto.vīdotu and ('Bad') Vaiiu are only two of the hosts of demons, who act under authority of the Evil Spirit and represent the forces of the evil, darkness, pollution and death – thought for Zoroastrian all these notions are equivalent. In the Avesta their realm is defined as *drug-*, 'Lie', that is, everything opposite to the universal law and 'Truth', *aša-*. The most prominent role in the Vīdēvdād, being the part of the Avesta focusing on the battle against the demons, is played by the motif of driving out the she-Demon of Death, who represents cadaveric pollution, and moreover, the corpse itself and it is called Druxš-ya-Nasu, 'the Lie which is the Corpse'. Numerous chapters of the Vīdēvdād deal with the cases of her assaults on the bodies of the dead and the living, as well as to the rites driving her out. This fact leaves no room for doubt about her importance and danger in the eyes of Zoroastrians, probably because she personified the 'transmissibility' or 'infectionness' of death. For a Zoroastrian, to be in 'infected' by death did not mean to go from hence into the other world or into the 'abode of righteous', but to become a receptacle of evil; it is due to this belief that the Zoroastrians had such a horror of a contact with a dead substance.

3.2. Fly attracted by the corpse

Druxš-ya-Nasu, arriving from the north in the shape of a disgusting fly, attacks the human body, once the soul has left it under the pressure of the other demons.

3.2.1. Sacred and polluted

The Zoroastrian terminology taken in general, as represented by the Avestan Vīdēvdād, does not constitute a consistent and well-elaborated system. This is clear, in particular, from the discrepancies in the texts concerning funeral rites. In contrast, the terms and epithets applied to the Druxš-ya-Nasu are defined quite sharply. Putting them into practice is determined by complicated gradation of the sacred and impure, a concept to be briefly set forth as follows: the more sacred a being is, the more pollution its corpse disseminates the more contagious it is. The cadavers of the nasty, demonic beings are therefore, pure, because the noxious creatures defile everything while being alive (V 5.27-38). For the activity of Druxš-ya-Nasu the following terms are elaborated:

she ‘pounces upon’, ‘swoops down’ (frāduuasaiti) on a good creature and, depending on the grade of its holiness, ‘overtakes’ (frāšnaoiti) a group of surrounding creatures, ‘infecting’ (paiti.raēθaeiti) some of them. As regards to the corpses of those beings, whose status of holiness is insufficient to be ‘infected’ by Druxš-ya-Nasu, the verb ‘admixes’ (ham.raēθaeiti) is used, – their corps does not ‘admix’ with the good creatures (V 5.27-36).

Moreover, a man carrying a dead body alone, becomes entirely a receptacle of Druxš-ya-Nasu, who ‘penetrates’, ‘admixes’ (*raēθbaθ*) with the sinner through his natural orifices, among which nose, eyes, mouth, penis and anus are enumerated, affecting him to fingertips (V 3.14). Obviously, ears were not included in this list by mistake; together with them, we would have the well-known scheme of the 9 natural orifices, in which the number ‘9’ is itself important.

3.3. Receptacle of the demon

Thus, the infective nature of this defilement is understandable. It is also quite clear that, elementary logical reasoning in this context does not permit deriving the diversity of the world from the corpse, which became a receptacle of the demon. Therefore, unlike Yama and Pūruṣa, the Avestan Yima and Gaiia Marētān, does not have to die in the course of the narrative of the increase of the world and mankind, as well as for the sake of justifying death, all the more so that, as the history of Yima was included in the Vīdēvdād.

4. Purification rites

A considerable part of the Vīdēvdād deals with the procedures of purification from

Druxš-ya-Nasu. All of them have similar structure and contain isolation of the purified in a room of minimum dimensions alienated from the community; restriction of food, drinking, clothes and contacts with the outside world; ritual baths and other purificatory activities. The most severe procedure is appointed to the abovementioned sinner, who transported a corpse alone, because he is believed to have become a corpse himself and to be very dangerous and contagious. Nevertheless, one does not kill him immediately, but allows him to live to get old in a special isolated building (V 3. 15-20). The description of this place of confinement is repeated in its entirety in V 5.46-49, in connection with the purification of a woman after miscarriage (her womb is called ‘tomb’, *daxma-*), and it is expanded in V 16.2-12, where the name of this place is mentioned as *airime gātūm* ‘place of repose’ (or ‘place of impurity’?). Here a woman in the state of impurity may spend, depending on her condition, up to 9 nights, after which time 3 holes are to be dug: two for a bath in the bovine urine, and one for a bath with water. Similar place is mentioned again in connexion with the main Zoroastrian purificatory ceremony ‘nine nights’ (V 9.33-36).

4.1 Rites of separation

Typologically, such a construction for isolation of those who are contaminated or to fulfil purificatory ceremonies before an initiation or consecration is close to the Zoroastrian ‘temporary tombs’ *kata-*, a sort of mortuary. They were made by threes (for men, women and children) in wintertime, when it was difficult to observe the Zoroastrian funeral rites (V 5.10-11). The small dimensions of the cells, as well as of the wards, were designed to minimise the dissemination of defilement. Actually, the Zoroastrian custom of ritual burying of nails and hair, which brought into existence special buildings with no entrance, accords with the same ideas. Zoroastrian wards for the ritually impure women had no normal entrance as well (it was considerably lower than the usual one). Obviously this is a trace of the well known ritual and mythological understanding of the unusual place of a dead person among the living people: dead cannot leave the house from usual door, a hole in the wall or another kind of opening have to be made for this.⁴ In the foothill of the Pamir almost until now the practice of isolation of the *amort* has been preserved, who were placed into small buildings, where they were agonizing alone, away from the village; according to some evidence, someone used to bring to them food, other witnesses report that it was only checked from time to time, to see whether a dying person is dead or still alive (Khamidjanova 1980: 289; Rakhimov 2007: 127f). The idea of isolation of the purified in a small room, associated with a tomb and with mother’s womb alike, is parallel to the Old Indian religious practice, where it undergoes profound ritual interpretation. The specific character of the Iranian attitude to the death is caused by the Panic fear before

⁴ It is interesting that fire temples were built in Iran using the same constructional scheme in order to hide them from the Muslims: according M. Boyce, a priest was forced to creep into the small camera without windows (it was located inside a dwelling house), where the sacred fire was being maintained (Boyce 1966: 51-52).

the defilement brought about by a corpse. The modern Persians and Tadjiks call the defilement through the death *siyāhī*, 'blackness'. It is believed that the 'blackness' during three days after one's death is imbuing the dead's house, and it is infective and dangerous for the neighbourhood. As for the Zoroastrians, it is well known that they regarded all symptoms of illness, ageing and corporal defects as results of activity of the Evil Spirit. Thus, the sacrifices offered up by ill or disabled were not accepted by gods. And just as the wicked did not ascend Noah's Ark so there was no room in Yima's Vara for the people with defects, that is, with the marks of the Evil Spirit.

4.2. The number nine

Apart from the isolation chambers, which can reasonably be called 'temporary tombs', the most important role in the driving out of Druxš-ya-Nasu is played by the place in which the ritual baths 'nine nights' are fulfilled. The using of number '9' here is absolutely clear ($9=3*3$), besides other meanings and significance in this case 9 also means correspondence between 9 holes of human body through which Druxš-ya-Nasu attacks a human being and 9 mythic Iranian rivers of universe by which this body has to be cleansed for the harmonious purity both of microcosm and macrocosm.

All varieties of these constructions by the Iranian Zoroastrians and Indian Parsees are considered in detail in the treatise by Choksy (Choksy 1989), I would like to emphasize only some significant points: the number of the holes in the most ancient Iranian ritual was 9 (3 groups by 3), the three sections of the road of the purified were paved with plastered soil, stones etc., different agents were used for the purification, first of all bovine urine, also different mixtures with ashes, the last thing used was water. The direction of movement during the purification was from north to south; the Parsees replaced it with the direction from west to east, a substitution caused by the difference between the localisation of hell and paradise in Iranian and Indian traditions. A prominent part in the ritual was taken by dogs, which drove Druxš-ya-Nasu by means of their sight. According to the *Vīdēvdād*, new holes for the baths were or could be dug every time there was a need to fulfil a new complex of the rites.

4.3. Directions and flies

The translations of Avestan designations of the cardinal directions were suggested by Bartholomae (1904: 79-80). To him, the Old Iranian concept of the directions did not fit the Old Indian one; the Zoroastrian paradise is associated with the south, the hell - with the north. Bartholomae's opinion was rejected by Lommel, who argued that the Old Iranian concept of the directions principally coincided with the Indian (Lommel 1923: 204f). Nevertheless, there is an undoubted textual evidence for Bartholomae's view, provided by the Hadoxt Nask, which was acknowledged by Lommel himself, who regarded it as an 'innovation'. Besides, Bartholomae's opinion goes well with actual ritual practices, preserved in Iran for centuries, placing the Zoroastrian hell to the north, and the paradise to the south. At any rate, this correspondence really took

place, as testified by Middle Persian vocabulary. Correct interpretation of the designations of the cardinal directions is of great importance both for the line of march of Iranian tribes to their historical territory, and to the pattern of their religious rites. Taking for granted the attested correspondence between the north and hell, especially if it evolved out of accord with the common Indo-Iranian attribution of hell and paradise to certain directions, as Lommel believed, different hypotheses can be suggested in order to account for this phenomenon. From the northern side, according to the *Vīdēvdād*, the she-demon *Druxš-ya-Nasu* arrives in the shape of fly. Such a representation of the demon is quite natural against the background of the total division of the creation with the adversarial position of its parts: all the insects, reptiles, varmints and other harmful animals, are believed by the Zoroastrians to be noxious creatures, *xrafstra-*, which are prescribed to be killed. The flies are mentioned between the *xrafstra-*, but their role is insignificant by comparison with *Druxš-ya-Nasu*. Again, in some Middle-East perspectives the flies take a rather prominent place. Apart from the well-known Hebrew notions of impurity of the flies and the exclusion of their penetration into the Temple, I mean the exegesis of the Old Testament by St. Jerome, according to which *Bā'al-Zebūb* is explained as 'lord of flies', a reading which was widely accepted in the Christian World. It is not excluded that this exegesis also corresponds to some realities with which St. Jerome got acquainted during his journey to the East. As for Semitic tradition proper, it may be worth noting that the Ugaritic god *B'l zbl* builds his palace on the *Northern Mountain* (Şapanu).

5. Dug-out holes

In fact, all the information we possess of Old Iranian purification rites, is drawn from the Avestan *Vīdēvdād*, – it is difficult to expect a lot of material evidences from pits dug out in earth. One can add to this some results of archaeological research, obtained in Pendjikent (V-VIII centuries AD), where an external court of a temple was excavated on a bank of a canal with a row of 9 holes disposed in the direction from west to east. The holes were dug in groups by three, a structure corresponding to the description of the *Vīdēvdād*. The western group of the holes was filled with tender ground mixed with coals (Shkoda 1997). I believe that this fact testifies to the direction of movement from west to east, because the coals and ashes could serve as additional purifying agents to be used on the first stages of the baths. The direction of the holes from west to east could be viewed as an argument in favour of Lommel's theory, but one should bear in mind that the Zoroastrian Soghd was subject to extremely strong Indian influence.

5.1. Ritual variation

Some other traces of purificatory rituals in Zoroastrian (or close to them) territories may not be so bright but nevertheless they are noteworthy. So, during excavations at a

Khwarazmian cult centre Kalali-gir 2 (IV-II centuries BC) a rectangular room with a *khum* at the entrance and a hearth in its remote part was opened with orientation probably from east to west (the entrance is at the east side), which was connected by B.I. Vainberg to purification rites: the surface of the floor had several layers of coating, and near this room 'a complex with rather strange pits faced with bricks' was located (Kalali-gir 2 2004: 88, 234). The irregular disposition of these pits was unlike the ones mentioned in the passages of the *Vīdēvdād* as well as the Pendjikent's straight row of holes, – and this circumstance suggests a possibility of variety in the ritual.

6. Archaeological excavations: Results

Very elaborated Zoroastrian rituals dealing with the driving away *Druxš-ya-Nasu* can have many different ancient roots.

So, in the course of work of the Margiana Archaeological expedition headed by V. Sarianidi, two rooms and a square (at two different parts of the site – Area 16 rooms 88 and 92, and also Area 13) with specially prepared holes were excavated in 2007-2008 at Gonur-depe, Turkmenistan (so-called Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex, Bronze Age).⁵ These three sets of holes are not alike and rather demonstrate different types of ritual construction with one or two common elements:

1. round holes with walls formed of clay / alabaster and
2. bricks.

The detailed description of rooms 88 and 92 was published recently in Russian by N.A. Dubova (Dubova 2008), and I would like only to stress some aspects which could be connected with ritual ablutions and impurity.

Floors of both rooms 88 and 92 are covered with a thick clay coating. As to typological close features of all holes, dimensions of which vary (*e.g.* from 30 cm to more than 1 m in diameter, from 5 to 40 cm deep), – almost all of them have walls from clay or alabaster (or clay / alabaster plaster), some are covered with pieces of ceramics and/or broken bricks and stones, especially at the square of the area 13. The purpose of such a placement can be not an attempt to gather water or something else, but striving to protect earth from pollution of ritual impure matters. This mode is well-known in different traditions, including Zoroastrian one. At Gonur's area 16, there are also some few solitary holes partially covered with pieces of ceramics of the same type; each of them is linked to a grave. One can suppose that after finishing burial, participants made a kind of ablution over such hole.

The filling of holes, besides the usual sand, very often contains ashes, some-

⁵ I am very grateful to Dr V.I. Sarianidi and Dr N.A. Dubova who allowed me to participate in the work of the Margiana Archaeological Expedition and use its materials.

times small parts of charcoal – substances which could be used as additional means for purification or as a kind of sacrifice during purification. At the same time all three objects are connected to animal sacrifices: some fragments of horns are found in the room 88, astragals in the room 92, burnt bones and astragals at the area 13. Thus one can assume that rituals fulfilled here represented an elaborated complex set of acts. Although the walls of holes sometimes bear traces of water or other liquids – they have the form of wave, which I believe possibly demonstrate that they were not filled with water (as a rule the walls are too thin for this), but small amount of water was poured over holes, as *e.g.* in Zoroastrian rites of purity. In one of the holes at the room 88 a broken vessel with spout was found which may have been used for ablutions and then was abandoned in its proper place. In addition to this in the process of removing the upper layers of soil at the area 16 room 88 in some holes a dry cracked ground with smooth surface appeared, it looked like earth was made wet and then it dried out.⁶

In case of the Area 16 near the holes several bricks were stacked, or one can find even a row of bricks as in the room 88. This is also close to the Zoroastrian system of ablutions, when priest or the candidate himself could stay longer and remain pure from ritual point of view in the places (*e.g.* stones) of the territory for ablutions.

An important detail is the direction of the assumed rituals. Both rooms 88 and 92 and three holes at the square of area 13 are oriented NS (room 88 shows that they were more probably situated from N to S, because of place for entrance, *e.g.*). The most interesting is room 88, which has not only holes and bricks, but also a little double bath(?) for feet(?) only, one part of which has a round opening perhaps for running water. Near this bath a gathering of small ritual ‘balls’ of clay was placed, in which I see individual sacrifices, perhaps substitutional, made in the process of a purificatory rite. Following the plan of the room 88 we can even outline a probable sketch of a path of the priest or the candidate from the eastern and western corners of the northern wall to the double bath and then on or along the brick row to the group of the holes placed in the south-west part of the room, where a central and more carefully made southern hole is the end of way. It is worthy of notice that not all holes were in use at the very same period, – the plan of room 88 by Dubova does not reflect a microstratigraphy, it shows rather all discovered holes. Some of them were made over others, and there were also very small remnants of the coating of former destroyed circles which were not depicted. Therefore one can suppose a relatively long period of use of this room for the same purpose.

Room 92 which is located not far from room 88 and on the same line, and admittedly forms along with the room 88 and some adjacent rooms a complex. The room 92 is perhaps a bathroom provided with an oven and a well for sewage. But it is not inconceivable that the oven served not only for heating water, but also for tempering ritual tools and vessels. N.A. Dubova in her description of the area 16 stresses that

⁶ On the contrary, N.A. Dubova insists on the absence of traces of water at the room 88 in her article (Dubova 2008).

the adjacent to the room 88, a room 87, is equipped with a niche with strongly fired walls and floor (Dubova 2008), which could also serve for the tempering.

As to the small square of the area 13, it was used, I think, for common and individual rituals, as evident from its composition and location between buildings or at a border of a complex of buildings. It is worthy of notice that planning of buildings which form this square is very similar to the one of the area 16 and very typical unlike many other parts of the site. So I suppose that these two areas could belong to one period. The same observation demonstrates the similarity in the discussed holes. At the square several holes with scattered pieces of ceramics and/or broken bricks and stones were open which were situated at the day surface of the ground. In some of them broken fired bones of animals were found. In addition to this in the southern part of the square a row of three dug holes located NS was discovered. It is not clear, how many holes were originally in the row because this part of the area was destroyed; but it could be an interesting case of a row of three holes which is well known in ancient Indian and Iranian practise.

Of course, I cannot affirm that rituals of Gonur are the same as Zoroastrian ones, – the interpretation of Gonur's constructions is controversial and the difference between Zoroastrian places for ablutions and rooms at Gonur is clear. It is possible only to suppose that in the ancient city civilisation with the high culture of priesthood we can find a basis for a future religion. It is very likely that the same parallel occurs in Indus valley civilization, where the Great Bath and places for ablutions were discovered at Mohenjo-Daro and the Vedic rules of ritual purity were derived from pre-Vedic ones.⁷ At the same time the difference between ancient Iranian and Indian mythological and ritual features probably can be explained by different pre-Indo-European traditions (though they also had close relations) which served as local backgrounds for important peculiarities in new religious systems.

⁷ But besides the possible future development the Gonur's rituals, they should have their own history too. We could find perhaps a parallel to the Gonur's holes at the site of Aji-kui, which is located several km from the first one. G. Rossi Osmida calls two rooms with a lot of holes at this site a 'sanctuary' (Rossi Osmida: 78). It is not inconceivable that at least one part of this set of holes was used for ritual ablutions; their large number could be in connection with the tradition of making new row of holes for new series of rituals. So, at Gonur the new holes were made over the old (room 88). Some parallels arise when we try to compare the facts of Gonur with Ancient Near Eastern rituals and ritual objects. I think that the Gonur's mode of making round holes with walls of coating, accompanied with sacrifice and together with use of some purifying matters such as ashes could be compared with Sumero-Assyrian rituals, especially *bīt-rimki*: in Assyrian texts one can find a mention of making an enclosure of alabaster for healing a diseased (Emelyanov 2003: 206); they fulfil rituals of *bīt-rimki* after making an animal sacrifice; different purifying agents were added in water for ablutions; the *bīt-rimki* ritual included seven individual ablutions, when Gonur's rituals consisted also of several ablutions carried out over separate holes; also 'balls' of clay attract attention.

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